

ENTERTAINMENT IN OLD ROCK HILL

For many years, beginning in the early 1900s, the Redpath Chautaugua visited Rock Hill bringing odd plays, outstanding musicians and inspirational lectures. Redpath's Chautaugua was a traveling version of the famed New York Chautaugua, a mountain camp that was, in one sense, an "off-Broadway" show that attracted a large summer audience.

Dr. D. B. Johnson, Winthrop's founder, introduced the Chautaugua to Rock Hill. Not only did Rock Hillians support the Chautaugua but so did the surrounding area. Often, Charlotteans came down by train carloads. The assurance of a full house allowed Redpath to perform on Dr. Johnson's signature alone. Only Greenwood, SC was said to have the same privilege. Other locations had to pre-sell tickets to at least 100 people to guarantee a minimum attendance.

But before Winthrop came to Rock Hill in 1895 there was a Opera House on Main Street. It also brought good plays and music to Rock Hill and, in fact, may have prepared the town to support the Redpath Chautaugua. While the Chautaugua performers only spent one afternoon or evening in Rock Hill, the performances at the Opera House were usually done over several days.

Wade Roddey had some good stories to tell about the old Opera House. For instance, Roddey said that there was a melodrama on stage with the villain threatening the heroine. "Suddenly a man jumped up, ran down the aisle, leaped up on the stage, grabbed the villain; and told him that he would permit no man to impose on a woman in his presence."

A famous hypnotist by the name of Boone appeared at the old Opera House. Boone was from Kentucky but did not say whether he was a descendant of the famous Daniel but Roddey did say that this Boone was the "handsomest man I ever saw."

On the stage with Boone was a small table and Boone told the audience that he was going to prove his claims. In the audience were two local doctors, Dr. Fennell and Dr. Stevens, and Boone knew that the two doctors had been calling him a fake.

He invited the two men to the stage. Boone then told the audience that Drs. Fennell and Stevens had been trying to make a monkey of him so he would now make "a whole menagerie of them."

Boone then asked Dr. Fennell to hold down one end of the table and Dr. Stevens to hold down the other. "Then Boone just laid his own hand on the center of the table and danced those two men all over the stage, they all the time trying to hold that table still. They strained and the veins stood out on their foreheads, but all to no avail." Roddey added that Boone "had their number."

There were a lot of traveling acts—from circuses to evangelists. Around 1890 in Rock Hill it turned out that the circus and an evangelist, the Rev. R. G. Pearson, sought the same audience.

Pearson had a large tent close to downtown and was preaching several times a day over a week's time. He was quite popular. It so happened that

Robinson's Circus was scheduled to come to town in the same week. Circuses always had advance men who scheduled their acts months ahead of time and would hire several people in the town to pre-sell tickets for them.

Pearson, the preacher, painted a vivid picture of the circus as the Devil's creation and convinced his audience that they should boycott the circus. And they did except for the mayor and several die-hard circus lovers.

According to Roddey, the circus owners were furious at losing so much money and they persuaded all of the circus companies to blacklist Rock Hill. He said that it was at least 20 years before a circus would even consider Rock Hill.

Roddey thought that it was the automobile, good roads and moving pictures that put the Chautaugua out of business. Circuses continued to make their yearly visits for a longer time but eventually they also found that it did not pay to "ride the rails" and visit small towns. It was left to cities to build zoos to display animals and sites such as Disney World, Dollywood and Branson to satisfy the craving of small-towners to be entertained by live performances.